

DOI 10.1515/anglia-2014-0045

**Gabor Itzès and Miklós Péti (eds.).** *Milton Through the Centuries*. Budapest: Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary / L'Harmattan Publishing, 2012, 337 pp., £ 28.00.

Conference volumes are often rather spotty, but the papers published in this one are of almost uninterruptedly high quality. It derives from a conference held at the Protestant university of Károli Gáspár in Budapest in the Milton centenary year of 2008. Many of the contributors are Hungarian, but a range of well-known international scholars from the UK, France and the USA also responded to the invitation. Its organizers write that they set out to assess the current state of Milton's reputation and they succeed in various ways. One approach is that signaled by Joseph Wittreich in the course of his own argument in favor of a visionary rather than physical journey in the wilderness of "Paradise Regained": the recent impulse, he says, has been "to embrace Milton as both an author of fissured texts and as a poet of 'uncertainties'" (20–21). These uncertainties "repeatedly destabilize a text" because "a radical hermeneutic undermines Milton's supposed allegiance to the traditional theological commonplaces. Milton is intent on delivering us from established systems of thought". This kind of approach has political implications, and accounts in part for contemporary interest in Milton, but it is often extended, as here, to all aspects of his work in both prose and poetry. Another essay gives the late Marshall Grossman what turned out to be a last chance to extend his widely canvassed argument that Milton intended the 1671 volume to be read as a whole, not as two separate poems, "Samson Agonistes" and "Paradise Regained". "Samson's direct progress from 'rouzing motions' to direct action under the Law" is transcended by "Jesus' pause after his baptism to discover the nature of his Messianic mission through reasoned debate" (4). Thus, the new covenant supersedes the old.

These well-known scholars are surrounded here by younger, less established critics, several from non-anglophone cultures including the host nation. A few are illustrated, either by fine line-drawings, like the essay on the shape of Milton's universe (with a brief digression on Escher); or by splendid reproductions exploring landscape in the background of Adam and Eve in, or expelled from, the Earthly Paradise; representations of Tobias and the Angel; or contrasting Medina's illustrations with William Blake's; or studying the widespread impact both in book illustration and painting, of the scene of the blind Milton dictating to his daughters.

Contemporary readers are not always ‘destabilizing’ Milton. Many older critics are also, it turns out, still being read and used: thus, in a couple of pages on the uses of place, Chia-Yin Huang manages to refer to Allan H. Gilbert, Walter Clyde Burry, Marjorie Nicholson, John B. Broadbent and Irene Samuel, as well as more contemporary writers such as Michael Lieb, Regina Schwartz or Nigel Smith. Other contributors here make similar use of earlier generations, and this is not simply what often happens when scholars present papers written far from up-to-date libraries of the Anglophone world. Some fine essays are about the difference between bliss and joy (Mimi Fenton), about prayer (Tibor Fabiny, one of the hosts), about the body and its senses, recent turns toward allegorical readings, about Milton’s use of his rhetorical training, about the role of the ‘arguments’ added to the 1668 reissue of “Paradise Lost”, or about the problem of God’s absolute monarchy in a poem written by an anti-monarchist: it turns out, God’s is not really an absolute monarchy since he repeatedly binds himself by covenant.

Other essays extend the range of Milton studies. Thus, one sets out to redeem Milton’s early “Fair Infant” elegy by comparing it with other poems of the period that also display extensive use of myth; another contributor, the distinguished Warren Chernaik, discovers interesting affinities with Traherne; another does so with Crashaw (and thus a reason why “The Passions” is only a fragment which ends with the question: “In what deep anguish / Didst thou languish, / What springs of sweat, and blood did drown thee?”), while another (one of the keynote speakers, Agnes Péter from Eötvös Loránd University) explains how Hungarian interest in Milton was originally sparked by the Reformed Protestant movement, especially in Transylvania. More generally, she explores what Milton has meant to Hungarian cultural memory: one Hungarian critic, for example, maintained that “Satan illustrates the thesis that Romanticism is the product of Protestantism” (185). Another well-known critic, Angelica Duran, explores Milton’s Spanish as well as global reputation; Marlene Edelstein studies Comus in the eighteenth century while Joan Blythe writes about Chateaubriand, Milton’s French translator, and his increasing revulsion at Napoleon-Satan. The main conference organizer, Miklós Péti, has a fine essay on the ‘Homeric spirit’ in “Paradise Lost”, and there are many other riches for the reader to unearth – Milton read in the light of René Girard, Eden as the site of some Fowlesian ‘god-games’, naked innocence in Milton and the visual arts with some surprising use of the terminology of clothing (though only one angel, Michael, as he approaches in Book 11, is actually dressed).

The cover design reproduces part of the electroplated Milton Shield from the Budapest Museum of Applied Arts, of which the original, created for the International Exhibition held in Paris in 1867, is in the Victoria and Albert Mu-

seum in London. This remarkable shield is worked in silver, steel and gold, and represents scenes from Paradise Lost. I would have welcomed some discussion of how this piece ended up in a Budapest museum, but otherwise it is hard to find fault with this beautifully produced book.